

## **PART – I: WOMEN**

A Woman in procreator, the mother of tomorrow and shaper of the destiny of civilization.

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru said: In order to awaken the people, it is the women who have to be awakened. Once she is on move, the family moves, the village moves and the Nation also moves.

Industrialisation, Globalisation, Urbanisation and Modernisation have led to some irreversible changes for women. On one hand liberalised economy has offered better education, jobs, decision making powers and opportunities for women. On the other hand, they have been targets of a strong backlash with increased violence in and outside home, wedge differences, discrimination and commodification in the society. Migration, adverse sex ratio, environmental degradation have increased the women's vulnerability.

India – a male dominated society, controls women's livelihood choices, sexuality and this control evolved over centuries through various discriminatory social practices and institutions. The combination of family, caste, community and religion reinforce and legitimise these patriarchal values. Stereotyping of women and their role continues in public and private institutions.

This paradoxical situation of women in India is alarming. One hand they are worshipped as goddesses, while on another hand burnt for dowry. Boys are more desirable and seen as a support for parents in their old age as well as to continue their family lineage.

Girls are considered unwanted burden yet used to support their brothers, husbands and suffer in silence as atrocities such as abuse, violence, rape and early marriages. If they break their silence, the repercussions are immense.

Discriminatory practices such as child marriages, dowry, honour killing, witch hunting and gender based sex selection indicate profound vulnerability of and inequality towards girls and women in Indian Society. Child marriages are a denial of childhood, with irreversible consequences, especially for girls. Dowry devaluates women. Witch hunting is a way to control a woman who do not conform. Gender based sex selection eliminates girls from families and societies,

altering the social fabric and causing future vulnerability to abuse and violence for those who are alive. Honour killing is barbaric violation and humiliation of girls and women.

Thus their struggle starts from Right to Life, evident from female foeticide issue, malnutrition due to poverty and discrimination, disparity in education, property rights, control over resources, participation in decision making, issues related with legal rights, atrocities such as rape, trafficking, child marriage, domestic violence, violence in society, etc. and there after exploitation within family at all stage.

In early childhood, girls are vulnerable to physical survival, in adolescent and young age to sexual abuse and in old age to economic vulnerability.

Hence, her struggle starts from her birth or even before her birth and continues till her last breath. Consequently, the issue of gender equality and women empowerment needs special attention and intervention, as they are indispensable goals for sustainable development and prosperity.

### **Status of Women**

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. In Ancient times, they are believed to enjoy almost equal status with men-particularly in early Vedic period. But with the coming of age of Manusmriti, the status of women was relegated to a subordinate position to men. Then, in Medieval India, the condition of women got worsened. Consequently, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy worked for their upliftment and empowerment. In Modern India, while drafting the constitution of India, special attention was given to the needs of women in India to enable them to exercise their Rights on Equal footing with men and participate in National Development.

As per Census 2011:

- India's population was 121.06 crore and female contribution 48.5% of it.
- Sex ratio all over India is 943.
- Literacy rate at all India is 72.98%.
- Literacy rate of men is 80.93%.

- Literacy rate of women is 64.63%.
- The workforce participation rate at all India level was 25.51% for females.
- Moreover, as in 2016, women ministers constitutes 12% in Central Council of Ministers, 12% in Lok Sabha.
- In 2015, share of women judges in supreme court was 4% and in High Court was 10%.
- In 2010, at all India level, 46% of elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions were women.

All these are the evidences of gender disparity and gender specific discrimination. As per data, women in India were not given equal status and opportunities as compared to that of their male counterpart.

Consequently, the need of women empowerment and gender disparity becomes and matter of grave concern.

### **Women Empowerment**

World Bank describes empowerment as “the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or group to make choices and to transform those choices into desired action and outcomes”. Perception of it changes over time and varies according to different social, cultural and political contents. What is taken for granted as a basic right in one society could be a struggle in another. Thus, it is an active, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept, which should enable women to realise their full identify and powers in all spheres of life.

The idea of women empowerment came forward when the Third International Women’s

Conference at Nairobi, in 1985, introduced and defined it as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. It consists of greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by customs, belief and practices.

It includes following components:

- Equal access to opportunities for using society’s resources.
- Prohibition of gender discrimination in thought and practices.
- Freedom from violence.
- Economic empowerment.
- Participation in all decision-making bodies.
- Freedom of choice in matters related to one’s life.

It can be achieved by ensuring:

- Awareness on gender equality
- Education
- Health and Nutrition
- Safety
- Financial Security
- Sensitization towards women.

As real empowerment of women can only happen if we redefine the status and role of women in the country and then we can make a big difference.

***(For Initiative for Women Empowerment visit Part - II)***